

**Not Your
Usual
Tawdry
Hollywood
Sex Story**
By Lynn Hirschberg

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Afghanistan's Found Generation:

Their first semester in the new world.

By Susan Dominus

Plus That Car Is You

By A. O. Scott, Douglas Century,
Danny Hakim, Jamie Kitman,
three master designers and a slew
of stylish drivers.

Shabana Is Late for School

But she and other Afghan girls are determined to make up for the five years of education they lost under the Taliban.

By Susan Dominus

Photographs by
Lynsey Addario

Early one morning in January, Shabana Nabizada, an 11-year-old girl from Ka-

bul, tried, and failed, to rush her sister Frishta out of the house. It was Shabana's first day of school, and she couldn't wait to burst out the door. Frishta, on the other hand, was moving slowly, taking her time as she finished cleaning up and getting dressed. "It was no big deal," recalls Frishta, a tall, softly rounded 17-year-old. "I'd been to school before." Frishta had been in elementary school in 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul and promptly interrupted her education and with it, her daily routine and her young friendships. She'd waited more than five years to return — what were five more minutes?

For her sister Shabana, on the other hand, the day was altogether novel. Darker than Frishta, with serious brown eyes, Shabana was only 6 when the Taliban came to power. Instead of going to school, Shabana spent many of her waking hours staring at the mountains she could see from the windows in one of her family's two rooms. Like most people in Kabul, her parents were ethnic Tajiks, and rarely let their daughters leave the house, afraid they'd be punished by soldiers or, worse, abducted — they'd heard stories about girls snatched from the street and married off to Taliban fighters, Pashtuns from the south. Frishta occasionally ventured out to the bazaar with her mother, but Shabana almost never strayed beyond her small, dusty front yard, enclosed by a wall so high even her father couldn't see over it. She never ran down the street to knock on a friend's door, never made up games with the neighbor's kids. There were no playgrounds, no parties. The Taliban had forbidden music and television, but her family had no electricity in any case. With the exception of one tattered first-grade language book an aunt had passed on, she had no books to puzzle over, no pictures to admire, no maps to trace with her finger. She was bored to exhaustion, too listless even to plead with her mother to let her

Shabana Nabizada at school in Kabul. Teaching girls became legal 10 months ago.



play outside. Unfed, her curiosity foundered.

But with classes finally starting, she recalls, it was as if she suddenly felt the cumulative pressure of five years of waiting and wanting and wondering bearing down on her. Unable to resist the momentum even one minute more, she took off without Frishta, pushing her way past the blue metal gate separating the yard from the street, then running down the narrow, snaking pathway outside her home.

Shabana made it about 15 feet before she stopped cold in her tracks. Standing alone, she felt dangerously exposed and realized that she didn't know the way. The mud-clay walls on either side were high and silent, and who knew what they hid? Maybe a Talib waiting to catch her in this act of disobedience, a bearded man in a turban who

she, too, was terrified. It was less than two months after the fall of the Taliban, and the time barrier separating one regime from the next seemed dangerously fragile, easily breached.

Eventually, the path widened onto a spottily paved road where cars sometimes passed, and men on bicycles streamed by toward Kabul's center, their long robes flapping behind them. Close to the yellow-walled entrance to the school, there was a man selling melons, and directly across the way was one of Kabul's myriad streetside cemeteries, small and humble, with triangle-shaped flags marking the graves. Standing at the entrance with her sister, Shabana hesitated. All those years of waiting, and now she couldn't make her feet cross that threshold. "Are you sure we should go in there?" she asked

Some of those fears are almost global in scale — the worry, for example, that at any moment Afghanistan may once again devolve into the chaos of civil war. Strife has been the norm for most of the past 23 years, and as the recent assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai makes clear, the threat is always present. For girls raised under the totalitarian Taliban, it's also hard to shake the concern that their forces might regroup and return. It's even hard to shake the sense that they're still in power. "Whenever leave the house, I have to reassure myself that it's O.K.," confessed Khalida Nasir, the 24-year-old translator who accompanied me through Kabul. "I spend maybe 10 minutes a day talking to myself this way. I tell myself, *No one will hurt you, Khalida — they are gone.*"

Since the girls can push aside those basic fears, they have to confront another set of more personal doubts: Can I adjust to school? Has too much time been lost? Can I ever catch up? And it isn't just the students who are taking their tentative first steps; the nation as a whole is experimenting with a relatively unified commitment to educating girls.

During the 60's and 70's, some girls in urban areas attended schools, but in the rest of the country, most parents kept their daughters home, usually for religious reasons. During the Soviet occupation of the 80's, compulsory education was enforced, but many parents resisted, for the same religious reasons but also out of fear that their daughters would not be safe or would be subjected to antireligious Soviet propaganda. When the Soviets pulled out and various mujahedeen groups battled for power, the rules changed from week to week. One warlord would turn a blind eye to the girls' going to school; another would issue a ban and violently punish anyone that defied it. Educated people with enough money left the country in droves, starting a shortage of teachers. The year the Taliban took Kabul, less than 10 percent of girls were enrolled. But Afghan educators aren't hoping just that the girls can catch up; in a country that can't afford to let any resource go to waste, they're hoping the girls can help pull the country ahead with them.

IN HER FIRST few weeks at school, Shabana ignored the other children. She could expand her world to include her teacher and her lessons, but the dozens of new faces demanded more attention than she could afford. One day after class, when other students were playing at recess, she found Frishta and dragged her back to the empty classroom. "She wanted me to go over with her what was on the board," Frishta says. "The letters of the alphabet. Sentences like 'The pomegranate is a fruit.'" A clear objective was sharpening Shabana's focus: an imminent exam that would place each student in the appropriate grade.

By law, girls living under the Taliban were to have the exact same set of experiences — essentially none, outside the duties of housework and



Shabana, sans burka, returns from the ice-cream parlor where she hangs out with other girls.

would kidnap her or beat her.

Her heart pounding, she ran back home. When she and Frishta emerged together a few minutes later, Shabana was clutching her older sister's hand. They walked together quietly, Frishta gliding, ghostlike, in her periwinkle burka, Shabana trudging along in a grandmotherly head scarf and a long dress over pants. Gradually, they made their way through the winding, constricted paths, watching their feet as they marched along pitted, refuse-strewn dirt alleys. Every time they turned a corner or passed by a door, Frishta felt Shabana squeeze her hand a little tighter. "We should walk more quickly; that way we won't get beaten," Shabana urged her sister. "No one's going to beat us — they're gone," Frishta reassured her. She was trying hard not to let her younger sister know the truth: that

Frishta. "What if they never let me go home?" Frishta told Shabana not to worry. "There's hundreds of girls in there," she said. "What makes you think you're so special that you're the one they'll decide to keep?"

FOR THE PAST 10 months in Afghanistan, girls of all ages have been pushing themselves to cross unfamiliar thresholds, their breath held, their scarves wrapped tightly around their heads like cloth armor. Their mothers and aunts are also emerging from the suffocating cloisters of their homes, but many of those women are resuming a life they once knew; in Kabul, particularly, they're returning to jobs they had held before the Taliban banned them, or walking the streets without burkas, just as many had for most of their adult lives. For young women and girls, however, a free life is a new life, entirely untested, rich with promise but fraught with fears and anxieties.

Susan Dominus is a contributing writer.

a passing familiarity with the Koran. But in reality, girls led very different lives over the course of those five years. Some girls had almost no schooling, engaging instead in menial labor for days on end. Others, like Shabana, caught bits of lessons when they could from siblings. A significant number of girls received home-schooling. They studied with their mothers, or their fathers conducted drills in the morning, then left enough homework to keep their daughters occupied until an evening exam. And across the country, thousands of girls simply kept attending classes, secretly, in shifts, their books hidden beneath their burkas, their teachers' or friends' apartments converted into makeshift classrooms.

Had Shabana's family been able to afford it, they might have sent her to an undercover private course taught at a nearby apartment by Asma Hakimi. A calm woman with hennaed hair peeking out from beneath her head scarf, Asma is now principal of Shabana's Deh Dana Naswan Girls' School and spends her time trying to secure financing for running water, books, a guard at the school gate, more rooms for the classes currently held in Unicef tents.

Those are luxurious concerns compared to the anxieties she endured while running her secret school, one of the largest in the area, with hundreds of students. Asma was running late one morning when someone raced to her house and told her several soldiers had found the school and imprisoned the teachers. By the time she arrived, the door had been broken in and chairs overturned and several girls were crying, bruised and beaten by the soldiers. One Taliban remained, who accused Asma of teaching the girls Christian lessons (a common pretext for punishing teachers). Asma persuaded him that he was mistaken, and she was allowed to leave, shaken but unharmed. She later found the other teachers hiding in the apartments of neighbors. Within a month, several girls' families came to her, lobbying her to restart the school. Asma did, adding a new requirement that all the girls carry Muslim religious texts as a precaution.

In retrospect, it seems the Taliban's enforcement of the ban against female education was somewhat sporadic. Indeed, it was an open secret that even a number of Taliban officials sent their own daughters to private classes.

With some trepidation, Shabana and two of her sisters, Frishta and Hafiza, sat down in late February to take their placement exams. (Khuttera, their 19-year-old sister, was too old to return, their mother said.) The results reflected just how much time they'd lost: Frishta, who is 17, ended up in seventh grade; Hafiza, who is 14, in fourth. Shabana was placed in the second grade. She was ashamed to be one of the oldest girls in her class. But at least she was placed one grade ahead of Zakia, her neighbor of exactly the same age. A week before school started, Zakia had knocked on Shabana's door to say hello, a miracle in itself; since then they'd become friendly, walking to school

together, running over to each other's homes to play, sharing a doll (until its head fell off). After they took the exam, sometimes Zakia liked to tell people that she'd placed into second grade. Shabana was always quick to correct her.

DESPITE ALL SHE missed out on, Shabana was slightly ahead of the curve. According to preliminary reports, close to half of all children enrolled in the new Afghan schools placed into first grade. (Although they haven't fallen behind to the same extent as girls have, boys have also suffered setbacks as the result of warfare, poverty and crumbling, unsafe schools.) These students create a massive demographic bulge that will demand special accommodation with each passing year. Four years from now, there will be a huge need for fifth-grade books and fifth-grade teachers. A decade from now, there will be a desperate crunch for 11th-grade teachers and 11th-grade books. And addressing lessons to classes that contain both young children and late adolescents will pose an instructional challenge for already overtaxed teachers.

Although girls in the more conservative south are only slowly enrolling in school — in the conservative south, for example, just 10 percent now attend — close to half the girls in Kabul are finding their way to classrooms. The sudden, sweeping entrance of a population into an education

opment is learn how to bridge worlds," Noam says. "That's a huge part of the task of childhood, the daily separations and returns, the opportunities to just walk down the street and explore the world."

As has been the case in other wide-scale traumas, the younger girls seem to be bouncing back more quickly than the older ones. Some experts believe young children recover more easily than older ones or adults because their visions of how the world should work are still flexible; as we grow up, our sense of normalcy tends to become more fixed, and disruptions tend to cause greater psychological damage. The older girls, teachers told me, often burst into tears at the slightest provocation. Principals described older students who went through the whole semester without uttering a single word, capable only of smiling nervously when asked a question. A friend of my translator Khalida's was having a hard time adjusting to university, where she had enrolled in January; after one particularly brutal reprimand she received from a professor, Khalida told me in a whisper, "she suicided herself." I asked Khalida whether she thought her friend succumbed to academic pressure or whether she had always been troubled. For young women in Afghanistan, Khalida told me, there's no way to say.

The older these young women are, the more years, and

When Afghan girls say they go to school to help rebuild their country, it sounds a bit force-fed. But given the destruction all around it's not hard to believe they want something better — and they want to build it themselves.

system is an unusual phenomenon that presents, as Gil Noam, a clinical and developmental psychologist at Harvard says, "an unbelievably important possibility to understand something about development."

Afghan girls, unsurprisingly, developed very close attachments to their parents and siblings — a visitor quickly notices that when girls sit by their mothers, they sit quite close, touching often — and strong parent-child relationships are generally considered the most crucial building block of a healthy psyche. But the Taliban's strictures precluded many of the other normal developmental stages of childhood: peer interaction, the daily routine of leaving the home, intellectual stimulation. As a result, the girls of Afghanistan offer psychologists a case study in the long-term effects of social deprivation — or the mitigating effects of strong family ties in isolation. "So much of what children do in devel-

more forms, of political violence they've witnessed. In the early 90's, open warfare decimated Kabul, reducing entire neighborhoods to crumbling, heavily mined ghost towns. A study released in 1997 — one year after the civil war ceased — found that nearly half of the Afghan children interviewed had seen more than one person killed. Both Frishta and Khuttera are old enough to remember fleeing their neighborhood during a rocket attack, passing on the way two men lying in the street, the blood from their wounds still flowing. The Taliban regime offered its own grinding horrors, but in large parts of the country, the shelling and gunfire died down.

How the older girls come to understand what they've experienced — their "conferring of meaning," as psychologists put it — also influences their resiliency. "If you feel that everything in your country is irrational and that chaos and danger might return tomorrow, naturally you

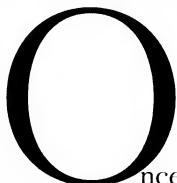
will be permanently traumatized and will probably tune out," says Howard Gardner, another developmental psychologist and a colleague of Noam's at Harvard. "If, on the other hand, you understand both the reasons why the world was temporarily chaotic and that there is a new government with new and presumably better values in place, then there is a better chance that you will be able to compose a meaningful life — that you will be able to integrate it into your sense-making system, rather than just pushing it out of your mind, which tends to lead to problems later on."

The teachers in Afghanistan, intentionally or not, have composed such a narrative for their students, fortuitously one that reinforces their own mission: it was the lack of education, they tell the students, that left us vulnerable to war — a message that has taken hold throughout the country. It's an idea that even young children can grasp and will continue to hear over the years, internalizing the historical trajectory as they grow older.

Although teachers are wildly overextended — in Kabul there are so many students they have to come to school in shifts — the spirit among them is elated, messianic. (Twice, teachers pulled aside my translator, Khalida, and, impressed by her largely self-taught English, demanded to know why she wasn't finishing school. In fact, she explained patiently, she had been about to graduate when the Taliban arrived and was now saving money for university.) They often talk about the opportunity and dignity

highest priorities, and he has pledged to divert funds from the defense and interior ministries to support the cause. To date, the country has depended largely on funds provided by agencies like Unicef, which has been heavily involved in rebuilding the educational infrastructure, supplying everything from cars for educators to books in various languages, tents when necessary, even book bags for the students. But the education ministry's own budget is still close to nothing, and Karzai is hoping for more funds channeled directly to the government. Strengthened by his words, the teachers all share a fervent hope that the peace will hold in Afghanistan, that the students in that first class will finish their schooling and that they will function as pioneers in the reconstruction of their country — that being a member of the class of 2014, whatever the starting age, will forever be a point of pride.

ON MARCH 23, Shabana, along with all her fellow students, began the new semester, at the same school where she'd prepared for her placement exam. By the end of April, she had grown familiar with the range of her curriculum: math, Dari (a language spoken by Tajiks), theology, Koran, calligraphy and drawing. Wide-eyed and close-mouthed for weeks, she finally started talking in class, surprising her teacher, Zarmina Ahmadi, by shooting her hand up whenever she knew the answer to a question. Ahmadi, pregnant and with twins at home,



nce too shy even to talk,

Shabana had become *karan kalak* — a little grown-up, a ringleader, shooting her hand up to answer math questions and playing jokes on her classmates.

that education yields. What they don't say, but what is everywhere evident, is that schools also serve a more specific political function, helping cement war-torn nations, bonding disparate tribes through similar experience and learning.

Ask the average Afghan girl why she's happy to be back in school, and she'll tell you a bit piously that she wants to help rebuild her poor country. On the one hand, it sounds forced-fed, the stuff of adult propaganda. On the other hand, there's no escaping the destruction all around her, the hanging, powerless electrical lines, the miles and miles of barely standing buildings, their ruins lined up like oversize tombstones, the sewage running thick along the sides of roads. It's not hard to believe the girls want something better — that they'd like to learn how to fix it themselves.

President Hamid Karzai has declared that education for all children is one of the country's

and she panicked, unable to think. Finally, she got one too many math questions wrong. Corporal punishment is condoned in Afghanistan, including Hafiza's teacher's method of choice: she pulled out a clump of her student's hair.

Hafiza went home, humiliated, and announced to her parents that she was done with school forever. And despite her parents' remonstrations, she never went back. If the school experience could be considered a kind of social experiment, Hafiza, sadly, would figure it as the control — the girl who chose to stay home. The quietest in her family, Hafiza tends to wrap herself in a scarf covering not just her head but much of her face, though her sisters have carried their scarves aside altogether. On the rare occasions she speaks or smiles, her hand flutters to her mouth. Wherever her older sister Frishta goes, Hafiza hovers close behind. She sits with her back pressed to the wall, as if she could wish herself to disappear into its blankness.

Frishta, three years older, had always rebelled against the Taliban's restrictions, dreamed about weddings and parties, accompanied her mother out of the house as often as she could. But Hafiza and Khuttera, the oldest sister, simply lost their taste for the outside world as the years wore on. Seclusion came to feel like a comfort rather than a cage, so that even when their mother asked them to come visit a relative, they used to say no; they'd rather stay home.

The start of school was supposed to help students break the habit of silence and invisibility, but in Afghanistan, a reliance on secrecy is pervasive, contaminating even the teachers' best efforts to help the girls free themselves from its confines. Over and over, teachers told me proudly that they advised their girls never to think about the hardships of the past five years and never to talk about them. Pretend it never happened, they tell their students, and just move forward, and the girls try, taking the box that was their lives and putting it carefully and deliberately in another, sealed tight, dark and silent.

COMPARED TO SHABANA'S dusty, tent-dwelling school, the secondary school called Tajwar Sultan, closer to the center of Kabul, is an academic oasis. One of the prettier, better-equipped facilities in Kabul, it has light streaming in the front hallways, and the luxury of wooden, if wobbling desks in the classrooms. As a group of seventh graders lingered in the hallway a few months ago, their test unexpectedly postponed, they explained to me how the social system in Kabul works these days. At the top of the popularity pyramid are the girls whose families had returned recently to Afghanistan from Peshawar, just over the border in Pakistan. They're easy to spot: those are the girls who laugh the loudest in the hallways, who are the most likely to walk up to a foreigner to ask a few questions boldly in English, their friends pushing to get closer on either side. Then, just below them, are the girls who had gone to home-

schools; finally, stuck at the bottom are the girls who hadn't had the chance to go to school at all. (There was much jockeying to jump ranks — and some mobility; a 13-year-old girl in the second category told me, for exceptionally pretty girls.) Ethnicity mattered less than experience; a Pashtun girl who'd stayed in Kabul all along had more in common with a Tajik girl who had also stayed than with a fellow Pashtun who'd left and come back. "The girls from Peshawar are always asking us what our lives were like under the Taliban," a 15-year-old girl named Zakera told me. "But we made a pact among ourselves that we weren't going to talk to them about it." They wanted to obey their teachers' instructions, but more than that, they did not want to become a subject of gossip fascination.

At the second-grade level at Shabana's school, she found that seniority in the classroom turned out to be an advantage rather than the liability she had initially feared. Once too shy even to talk to the students sitting next to her, by the time spring had started to warm the air, her mood seemed to lighten correspondingly. She eventually became, as her teacher put it, *kalan karak* — a little grown-up, a ringleader, the one who bossed around the younger girls. Shabana started coming home and telling her family stories about her conquests in school, how proud she was when only she knew the answer to a math question. Sometimes she told them, laughing, about jokes she and her friends had played on their classmates. They hid a girl's notebook from her one day, another girl's ruler the next.

Shabana had always been particularly shy around her father, Mohammed, whose work as a house painter took him away from Kabul for long stretches at a time. When he was at home, Shabana had been afraid to speak to him directly. "Because of the kidnappings, he was always very strict," her mother recalls. "She was a little scared of him." But one afternoon well into the semester, her father asked her, as usual, to bring the family some water from the well. Instead of silently putting her book down and executing the task, as she normally would, Shabana looked up at him and asked defiantly, "Am I your servant?"

Her family was temporarily shocked into silence. "We were all scared," says her brother, Fahim, a small, handsome 13-year-old with a fierce gaze. "We thought he was going to hit her." Her mother, appalled, launched into a tirade, but based on something he saw in Shabana's eye, Mohammed stopped his wife.

"Shabana," he asked his daughter gravely, "were you trying to make me beat you ... or were you just joking?"

Shabana grinned widely. "I was joking!" she answered. Everyone laughed loudly, a little nervously, and the exchange went down in family history. "Now she jokes around with me all the time," Mohammed says. "I love that."

The direction of Shabana's transformation, from fearful to mildly rebellious, seems re-

able within an American framework. Yet parents and teachers of other girls her age noticed an opposite transformation. A mother I met in one of the small ice-cream parlors set aside for women spoke, somewhat amazed, about the way school had civilized her daughter, now sitting next to her on the bench, wearing the traditional student uniform of black dress and white scarf. "Before, during the Taliban, she was so rude," the mother said. "She used foul language and didn't show me any respect. I thought it must be because she was cooped up at home, so I sent her to private courses, but that didn't help. Once I asked her to wash the dishes, and she started screaming at me — 'I won't do them, I hate them!'" Her 13-year-old daughter listened quietly as her mother

But perhaps nowhere were the effects of shifting gender roles more emphatic than in the family of Wahida, a 10-year-old girl who had spent most of her young life as a boy called Wahid. Wahida was the fourth daughter born in a family that had no sons, a situation considered a family disgrace, as well as a major inconvenience, since girls couldn't run errands or leave the house unaccompanied. So from the time she was a baby, Wahida's parents simply presented her to the world as Wahid, and, when she was old enough, sent her off to school with the boys. After the fall of the Taliban (and with her adolescence just a few years off), her parents felt safe to reveal the truth to her principal. "When I told the kids, they were astonished,"



Shabana at school. In Kabul, nearly half the girls are enrolled, but in the south, just 10 percent are.

recalled the incident, focusing on her quickly dripping cone. "Now, I see a lot of changes," her mother said with apparent relief. "Now she takes more responsibility at home. She seems quicker — she gets things faster. And she always does her classwork, without my having to tell her. School encourages her."

The country's major political transformations also triggered minor family revolutions, or at least realignments. Shabana, once deferential to her older sister Hafiza, eventually started to take on the role of the older sister herself, earnestly encouraging Hafiza to give school another chance or taking charge during chores. Some of the adjustments threatened longstanding privileges of power: shortly after the Taliban fell, all over Kabul, brothers and sisters started arguing about the girls' freedom, with many young men resisting the demise of the burka or the extension of the once-exclusive privilege of education.

the principal says, "but everyone started laughing and clapping Wahida on the back, congratulating her." Her classmates were proud, as if she had pulled off the ultimate practical joke. Wahida, a nearly silent girl with a bashful face, hooded eyes and short hair, is now enrolled happily in a girl's class. (Particularly crowded schools mix boys and girls in the early years, but most do not.) Although she says she felt relieved to have her secret out, she still seems to be sorting out the meaning of her new identity. Asked if she feels more like a girl or a boy, Wahida hesitates indefinitely — she's either baffled by the question or she's trying to figure out which answer all the grown-ups in the room want to hear. Her outfit suggests Wahida still feels a strong allegiance with the boys: she hasn't yet changed over to dresses, instead wearing pinstriped pants and a cowboy shirt. But every one of her *Continued on Page 36*

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nails has been painted bright, fire-engine red, enticingly shiny and unmistakably girlish.

Within days of the fall of the Taliban, Shabana and her sisters started asking their mother, Gulshireen, if she would take them for ice cream, an indulgence forbidden to girls under the former regime. The ice-cream parlor is still one of the few public spaces where women are likely to congregate: the movies are considered licentious and restaurants, a novelty mostly for foreigners, too expensive. "Every other day, they're asking for ice cream," Gulshireen says, rolling her eyes. At a typical parlor, the girls still sit at a separate room with narrow benches. Like almost all Afghan girls, Shabana and her sisters don't stop to talk to the boys as they make their way to their own chamber; they don't make eye contact or even say hello. Simply walking past the boys feels daringly new.

Although no longer regulated by Taliban law, the interactions between young men and women are still few and far between. The playing field, of course, has been somewhat leveled, but the two teams still never really occupy it at the same time. At their local ice-cream shop, Shabana and her sisters can sit staring at the TV for hours, happily mesmerized by the belly-dancers flitting and nearly but never kissing; but the idea of dating or courtship still comprises a fantasyland, the realm of pretty but infidel foreigners. Marriages, even in Kabul, are strictly arranged affairs orchestrated by the parents.

Two of Shabana's sisters, Frishta and Khuttera, the oldest, still wear burkas, as many girls do, simply to

avoid men's half-hostile, half-hungry stares. I asked Shabana if she thinks she'll wear a burka when she gets older. "No way," she said. "If I have to, then I don't want to grow up."

Shabana's neighborhood is only 15 minutes from the center of Kabul, but culturally it's somewhat provincial, and at her school almost all the girls still wear burkas. At Tajwar Sultana, the more handsomely appointed school (with the wobbly wooden desks) that is close to the center of town, there are almost no burkas in sight. Zakera, a quiet, careful girl with an innocent wide-eyed look, says it took her about a month after the Taliban's fall before she felt brave enough to cast her burka aside. But when she finally did, she says: "I felt so much lighter. Everything looked so bright. I hadn't remembered how bright it was outside." Recalling that day, she smiles for the first time in our conversation. "I thought everyone would laugh at me," she says. "But they didn't. All my friends congratulated me."

Zakera is the girl who told me her friends had vowed not to talk about their lives under the Taliban. But sitting in an empty classroom one afternoon after an exam, she made a brief exception. One by one, she told me, her older sisters had married off and moved out, leaving her unbearably lonely. To earn money for her struggling parents, she spent six or seven hours a day embroidering tablecloths and napkins and men's collars with tiny, measured stitches in geometric, endlessly repeating patterns. "When I wasn't embroidering, I slept all the time — two or three hours in the middle of the day," she says. "There was nothing else to do." She pulls her scarf forward a bit and turns her head to the side, so that the eyelet-trimmed cloth hides

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her face, which is wincing from the effort of holding back tears. "I felt like I didn't exist," she says, shaking her head. "I wished I wasn't alive."

At home with her cousin a few days later, sitting on the floor and serving candied almonds and tea, Zakera recalls the first time she asked a teacher a question in class, how she forced herself to speak up after two weeks, coaching herself all the way to school. Her cousin, on the other hand, plays it a little bit more cool. She says she was never nervous in school, and in fact, regularly goes to the bazaar entirely by herself, without the burka. Did she feel uneasy the first few times? She shakes her head. "She says no," my translator tells me. "But I don't really believe her."

Zakera does not go to the bazaar, or sightseeing with her parents, or out to visit the homes of friends, with the exception of her cousin. For now, she's content to expand her horizons within the safety of her living room, mesmerized by the Afghan television that resumed soon after the Northern Alliance's victory. She watches it for five hours a day, every day, sitting through the news, sports (especially volleyball), the instructional children's hour, the teenagers' hour and the serial drama. (Fortunately, one hour a night is devoted to the news in Pashtun, which is when she takes her dinner break.) While she struggles with her reading, television is her shortcut to worldliness, an instrument of socialization as much as entertainment. Through the soap operas, she has found a way to bond with her fellow classmates, who spend most of their recess rehashing the previous night's developments. Television was

introducing her to the foreign world of Indian romances, shocking but beautiful; until local officials in Kabul canceled the program in September it was even teaching her how to dance, or giving her the inspiration to try. A couple of months after the Taliban had left, she and her cousin Sarah put on a tape of Indian music when no one else was home and spun around the room wildly, laughing and waving their arms. "We danced like crazy people," Sarah says. "For five years, we weren't allowed."

Zakera's mother says: "Whenever they're together now, she and Sarah are always talking about the future. Here's what I want to do — well, here's what I want to do." Like almost all the other girls, they say they want to be doctors, or maybe teachers.

Every once in a while, Zakera wakes up with a start, her heart pounding. In her worst nightmares, she's back at work, needle in hand, hunched over a cloth. But lately she has started having different nightmares, apparently universal ones. She shows up for an exam, but she forgot to study and doesn't know any of the answers. "I prefer that nightmare," she says. "Under the Taliban, when you felt unhappy, there was no solution, nothing you could do. But if you're worried you don't know anything, there's something you can do: you can study."

BY LATE JULY, Shabana was almost unrecognizable from the shy, mute girl who'd come to school that first day. Whenever I came to visit her at the end of classes, I'd spot her hanging back along the perimeter of the courtyard, stealing glances my way as she hung back with her friends, a few younger girls trailing behind, her sidekicks. Then, just as I'd start talking to a teacher or to Shabana's

mother, Gulshireen, who had begun working at the school as a cleaning woman, Shabana would show up right in front of me, smiling her wide smile, her head scarf dangling casually around her neck. "Sa," she'd say casually. *Sa* is short for *salaam aleikum*, the Arabic salutation. It's a common kid's shorthand, with a little attitude: *Wissup*.

Her stories weren't always linear, but they had a certain winning self-assurance. (No, she told me firmly, I couldn't walk her home from school, because that's when she and her friend Zakia like to race each other all the way back.) Her newfound confidence is particularly manifest in her smile: it's bold and pretty and a little bit proud, as if maybe she's aware of its charms.

On one of my last visits to her home, Shabana answered the gate, showing off a bright turquoise dress with a bright pink piping on the front. "It's my party dress," she tells me. "I got it to wear to my sister's wedding."

Her sister's wedding? Surprised, I ask Gulshireen — was there another daughter whom I haven't met? Have I misunderstood something? After a quick pause, Gulshireen answers no, then changes the subject. But a few minutes later, she brings it up again and apologizes. "To be honest," she said, "we didn't want to tell you, but Frishta is married."

Some time after the start of the semester, during one of Mohammed's long stretches away from home in search of work in other cities, a cousin's parents came to the house and said they wanted to arrange for Frishta to marry their son. Under pressure from her relatives, Gulshireen finally consented to the marriage, which took place in April. "We try to keep it a secret, because otherwise Frishta wouldn't be able to go to school," Gulshireen says.

"Instead, they would require her to go to some kind of occupational school, because they don't want married women to mix with the young girls." (Some schools do allow it.)

As for Khuttera, the 19-year-old sister who I'd been told was too old for school, Gulshireen explains, she is currently engaged, but to a man whose situation they had misunderstood. He said he had money; he said he was open-minded. But they eventually found out that he had no money, and after the Taliban fell, he decided Khuttera could not attend school. Khuttera is present as her mother explains these complicated arrangements, and as the story unfolds she looks down, tracing paths in the fiery red carpet with her finger. Khuttera had been a star student, her mother tells me, second in her class, much smarter than Shabana, and Shabana's idol. Now the family's oldest daughter is caught in limbo: She won't actually marry her fiancé until he earns more money, but she can't go to school against his wishes either. Nor can she break the engagement; girls who do that are known as widows, and they never receive other offers. I ask Khuttera how she envisions her future. "I don't," she says. Khalida, who has been translating the conversation, averts her gaze from Khuttera and speaks to me in a low voice. "Madam," she says, "I think we had better talk about something else because Khuttera is trying not to cry."

The next day, Frishta, the secret bride, is home visiting, and she looks embarrassed to see me — embarrassed that she lied, and embarrassed that she is already married at so young an age. She sits down on the overlapping carpets and tries to explain how she feels about her new life. On

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the one hand, she tells me, she married a nice guy — he's a teacher, and in fact he's the one who's pressured her to go to school. But she herself feels ambivalent about returning to the classroom. It's not just that she feels too old for the material; the homework also puts extra pressure on her time, since she still has to do all the housework for her husband's family (and apparently still spends a lot of time in her parents' house). Besides, she explains, the best part of school — the chance to make friends — is lost on her, since she can't let anyone get too close or reveal anything about her real life. Sprung from one secluded, secret life by the Taliban's fall, her marriage a few months later catapulted her right into another. "It weighs on me so heavily," she says. "If I weren't married, I'd have no problems."

Frishta wishes her teenage years could be more